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ABSTRACT

Mexican American women have higher fertility rates and higher divorce rates than does the general population of the United States. In light of these data and the documented negative effects of marital distress and divorce on spouses, Mexican American women appear to be at risk for psychological stress. To provide some insight into the marital problems of Mexican American women, the relationship of interethnically and intraethnically married Mexican American women was compared in terms of cultural background or level of acculturation, level of marital satifaction, and marital problems. Interculturally married Mexican American women (N=15) married to Anglo American men and intraethnically married Mexican American women (N=12) married to Mexican American men participated in individual interviews and completed: (1) an acculturation questionnaire that assessed their level of identification with the Mexican American culture and with the Anglo American culture; (2) a Problem Inventory that asked them to identify problems in their marriages due to cultural differences; and (3) a marital satisfaction questionnaire. The results revealed that, compared to intraethnically married women, interethnically married women were more acculturated toward the Anglo American culture than toward the Mexican American culture and showed a trend that asked them to identify problems in their marriages due to cultural differences, and (3) a marital toward a higher level of marital satisfaction. Correlational analyses revealed that for both groups, levels of acculturation were significantly correlated to marital problems, marital satisfaction, and social support systems. The results also provided evidence for a greater degree of traditionality in the intraethnic marriages, consequently leading to marital distress and dissatisfaction. (Author/NRB)

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Marital Relationships of Interethnically and Intraethnically Married Mexican American Women: A Developmental Perspective

For A.P.A. Symposium, "Mexican American Women: Themes Throughout the Lifespan",
Presented at 93rd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at Los Angeles, California, August 1985

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Abstract

The present study examined various components of the relationships of interethnically and intraethnically married Mexican American women. T tests revealed that interethnically married women were more acculturated towards the Anglo American culture and less towards the Mexican American culture than the intraethnic group, and showed a trend towards a higher level of marital satisfaction. Correlational analyses revealed that for both groups, levels of acculturation were significantly correlated to marital problems, marital satisfaction, and social support systems. The results also provided evidence for a greater degree of traditionality in the intraethnic marriages, consequently leading to marital distress and dissatisfaction. Implications for viewing acculturation as a developmental process with concomitant impact on the women and their marriages are discussed.

In passing from adolescence to adulthood, one of the major developmental tasks embraced by women is marriage. Previous research has identified various factors that impact on and influence marriages (Duvall, 1980). In examining the marriages of Mexican American women, we believe that cultural background is a critical factor operating as a dynamic process impacting on their marital experience. Before we examine the marital relationships of Mexican American women, it will be helpful to review some facts.

First, census data reveals that the majority of Mexican American women are 24 years old or younger (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982). Second, Mexican American women have higher fertility rates than the general population and third, they also have higher divorce rates (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982). In light of this data and the documented negative effects of marital distress and divorce on spouses (Markman and Jones Leonard, in press), Mexican American women in general are at-risk for psychological distress. Unfortunately, the news doesn't get any better since there is a segment of the population of Mexican American women that may be at an even higher risk for distress, Mexican American women married interethnically.

In 1982, 18% of the total number of married women of Spanish origin were married interethnically (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983). An interethnic marriage involves people of two different ethnic backgrounds, such as the marriage of a Mexican American woman to an Anglo American man. This is

contrasted to an intraethnic marriage, that involves people of two similar ethnic backgrounds, such as the marriage of a Mexican American man to a Mexican American woman.

These data stimulated us to begin a program of research on prediction and prevention of marital distress in Mexican American women as part of a larger research project on the origins of marital and family distress. Today we would like to share with you the results of a study that compared the relationships of interethnically and intraethnically married Mexican American women in terms of cultural background or level of acculturation, level of marital satisfaction and their marital problems. These three areas were selected as our focus since we felt that they should be able to discriminate between women with successful and unsuccessful marriages and hence contribute to our understanding of why interethnically married Mexican American women are at increased risk for marital distress.

Assimilation vs. Acculturation. Historically, researchers have shared a single perspective for understanding interethnic marriages based on the theory of assimilation (Berry, 1980). The process of assimilation requires the relinquishing of an individual's cultural identity in order to move into the larger society. Thus interethnic marriages that involved Mexican Americans, were evaluated as a sign of how quickly Mexican Americans were assimilating into the Anglo American society and it was assumed that their Mexican American culture would be relinquished or lost (Berry,

1980).

In sharp contrast to this assimilation perspective is the acculturation perspective (Berry, 1980). This perspective posits that the act of marrying interethnically does not necessitate the relinquishing of one's cultural identity (Salgado de Snyder and Padilla, 1982). Acculturation is the process of identifying, in varying degrees, with two cultures, and in our study it is defined as identification with both the Mexican American culture and the Anglo American culture. The first major objective of our study was to to examine how interethnically married women compared to intraethnically married Mexican American women in terms of level of acculturation to the Mexican American culture and to the Anglo American culture. It was hypothesized that interethnically married women would identify with both the Mexican American culture and the Anglo American culture, as the acculturation perspective would propose, versus identification with only the Anglo American culture, as the assimilation perspective would have us believe.

Marital Functioning. As a result of the coming together of two individuals in a marriage from different ethnic backgrounds, research indicated that these interethnic marriages are accompanied by a host of issues which may be problematic. Some of the areas identified that interethnic couples may have problems with, were for example: communication, values, stereotypes and relationships with their extended families. In addition to the strain introduced by

these problem areas, an interethnic marriage may also be at risk for problems by the strain imposed by negative social attitudes that exist toward interethnic marriages. The second major objective of our study was to to examine marital problems and marital satisfaction. It was hypothesized that interethnically married Mexican American women would have more problems in their marriage due to cultural differences and would be less satisfied with their marriage.

Methods

The subjects were 15 interethnically married Mexican American women (married to Anglo American men) and 12 intraethnically married Mexican American women (married to Mexican American men). All of the women were from the Denver Metropolitan area. Subjects completed an acculturation questionnaire that assessed their level of identification with the Mexican American culture and with the Anglo American culture, a Problem Inventory that asked them to identify problems in their marriage due to cultural differences, a marital satisfaction questionnaire, and finally they all participated in individual interviews.

Results

Demographics. Women in both the interethnic and intraethnic groups were relatively the same age (M = 34), the mean was 34 years. Although they did not differ significantly in age, they did differ in length of marriage and number of children. Intraethnically married women had been

married for 15 years and had on the average 3 children, whereas women in the interethnic group had been married on the average for 8 years and had only 2 children. Thus, intraethnically married women had been married twice as long and had 50% more children than interethnically married women. These differences were the first indication that these two groups of women might differ in terms of adherence to traditional Mexican values. With regard to other demographic information, the two groups of women did not differ in their level of education or income.

Acculturation. In examining level of acculturation, interethnically married women were found to be more acculturated to the Anglo American culture and less acculturated to the Mexican American culture.

Insert Table 1 about here

Interethnically married women scored 5.16 on Anglo American acculturation and 3.37 on Mexican American acculturation. These findings were somewhat contrary to the acculturation theory, which supports the integrative process of two autonomous cultural systems. On the other hand, intraethnically married women were very balanced in their levels of acculturation to both cultures, with scores of 4.26 and 4.27.

Overall examining these women's levels of acculturation indicated that this area is much more complex than was expected. Through the interviews it became clear that both

groups of women were struggling with related, but different, cultural identity issues. For example, one interethnically married woman reported not feeling any type of strong identification with her cultural background and being at a point where she wanted to learn more about her culture. However she didn't know how to go about doing this! One intraethnically married woman reported feeling trapped by the expectations her husband had of her, which included being a stereotypical "good Mexican housewife."

Their relatively high Anglo American acculturation scores may indicate that interethnically married women were Anglocized prior to marriage and were not typically raised to identify very strongly with their Mexican heritage. While their choice of an Anglo American mate probably reinforced their prior Anglocized upbringing, the interview data combined with Mexican American acculturation scores above the mean suggest that these women are struggling with how to have the "best of both worlds." They often found it awkward, having to figure out how to perceive their ethnicity. While scores of the intraethnically married women seem to indicate that they are having the best of both worlds, the interview data and the marital satisfaction results, however, indicate that they are struggling to integrate the two cultures in their lives.

Next in terms of marital problems, no differences were found between the two groups. However, interesting findings were found when marital problems were examined in light of

levels of acculturation.

Insert Table 2 about here

For women who were intraethnically married, the more Anglocized they were, the more problems they had due to cultural differences. Whereas intraethnically married women who were more Mexicanized, had fewer problems. It may be that for women in this intraethnic group, the more acculturated they are to the Anglo American culture, the more they adopt Anglo American values, which may be more egalitarian, as compared to traditional Mexican American values. These egalitarian values may come in conflict with their husband's more traditional values and expectations (Torres-Matrullo, 1980). This conflict in clashing values may account for the increase in problems.

For the interethnic group however, there was no relationship between levels of acculturation and problems. In their case it may be that since this group of women, as a whole, are more Anglicized, their values are being reinforced and supported by their Anglo husbands. It may also be that the positive aspects of these interethnic relationships overshadow cultural differences.

Finally, in the area of marital satisfaction, interethnically married women were more satisfied with their marital relationships.

Insert Table 3 about here

They scored 118, as compared to the intraethnic group which had a score of 96. These findings were contrary to widely held assumptions about interethnic marriages. Lower levels of marital satisfaction for the intraethnically married women may be explained by their longer length of marriage and greater number of children. Researchers have found that there are certain characteristics of long-term marriages which contribute to a decrease in marital satisfaction (Burke and Weir, 1982) and that, in general, the presence of children in a family also contributes to a decrease in marital satisfaction (Glenn and McLanahan, 1982). These findings may also be explained by, and provide further support for, the traditional roles that the intraethnically married women adhere to and the conflict engendered by this adherence. In the present study intraethnic relationships, in general, appear to be less egalitarian than the relationships of interethnically married women. Through the process of acculturation, intraethnically married women have changed their own sex role expectations, which has led to role conflict and stress, and they appeared to feel that they had few recourses for change.

In conclusion, in the present study the examination of interethnic and intraethnic marriages reveals that interethnic marriages should not be explained by a blanket statement

based on the theory of assimilation. Interethnically married women do not appear to have completely relinquished their ethnic identity. They identify less strongly than intraethnically married women but nonetheless, have managed to retain some degree of ethnic identification. Acculturation must continually be seen as a dynamic process. There is a definite need for further research in the area of the development of ethnic identification, specifically how individuals integrate cultures and the impact of this integration on their lives. An examination of problems revealed that interethnically and intraethnically married women may be experiencing different types of problems in relation to their levels of acculturation. It is no longer sufficient to say that interethnic marriages are more problematic than intraethnic marriages! Both groups of women may be struggling to have the best of both worlds, but are lacking the support bonds to do so.

Based on this study, Mexican American women are having a difficult time integrating values from two cultural backgrounds. The confusion, ambiguity and distress resulting from the acculturation process appears to be having an impact on the adjustment of Mexican American women, which in turn is related to their marriage. Future research needs to focus on acculturation as a developmental process, in order to determine how to assist Mexican American women with this dynamic component of their life. For example, as part of our continuing research program, attention is now being

focused on interethnic relationships during transitional periods, such as the onset of marriage. Also, to assist in developing clinical guidelines, an intervention program is presently being initiated at the University of Denver. Interethnic and intraethnic premarital couples are being recruited to participate in workshops. With this information we hope to begin to construct helpful clinical guidelines and address the void of research in the area of interethnic and intraethnic marriages involving Mexican American women.

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TABLE 1

ACCULTURATION LEVELS FOR INTERETHNIC AND INTRAETHNIC GROUPS

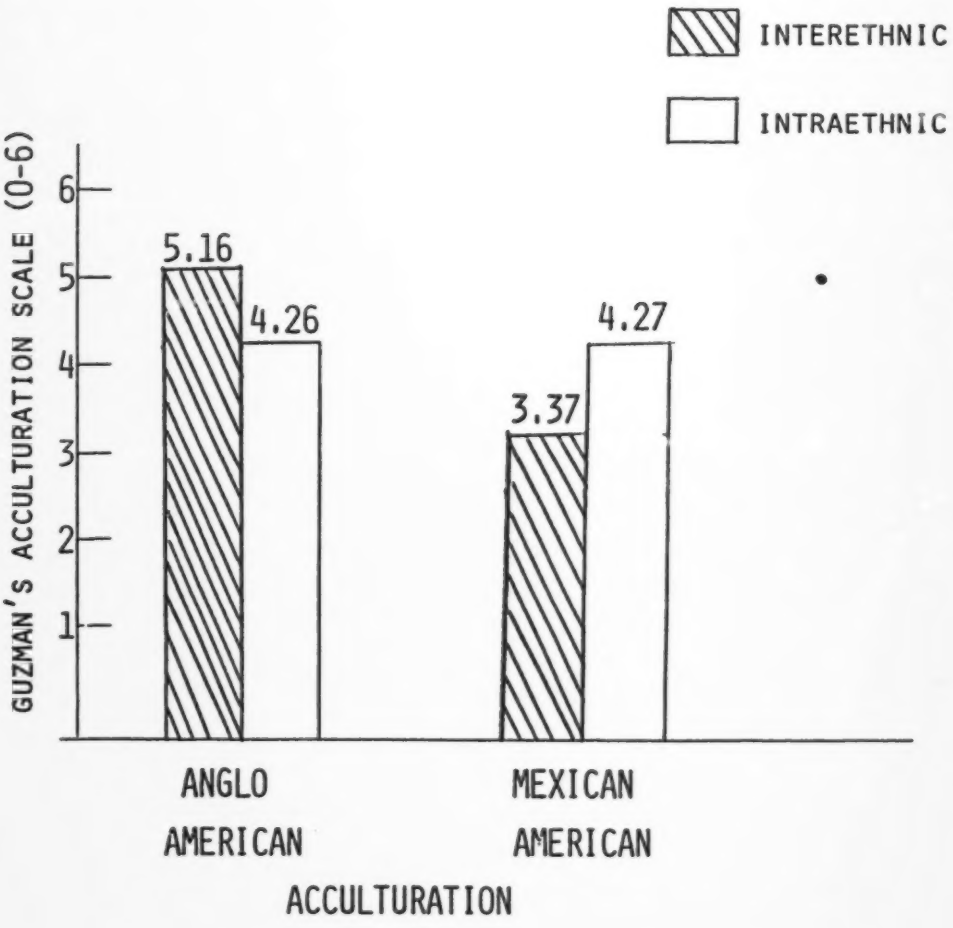

TABLE 2

INTRAETHNIC:

HIGH ANGLO AMERICAN ACCULTURATION
MORE ANGLICIZED ($r = .66$, $p \leq .05$) -----> PROBLEMS

HIGH MEXICAN AMERICAN ACCULTURATION
MORE MEXICANIZED ($r = -.48$, $p \leq .05$) --< PROBLEMS

INTERETHNIC:

NO RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACCULTURATION LEVELS AND PROBLEMS

TABLE 3

MARITAL SATISFACTION LEVELS FOR INTERETHNIC AND INTRAETHNIC GROUPS